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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: STRONG GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE IN LOCAL
GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

REF: A. COLOMBO 495

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 400

[1](#)1. (SBU) Local government (LG) elections were held March 30 in a total of 266 Municipal Councils (MCs), Urban Councils (UCs), and Pradeshiya Sabhas (PSs- village councils) in most areas of Sri Lanka except the north and the eastern district of Batticaloa. (Note: Polling in those areas is due September 30. Elections in an additional 22 localities have been postponed indefinitely. End note.) Despite some violence, observers declared the elections largely free and fair. The governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won 83 percent of the councils, not surprising since historically, the governing party has captured a large majority in LG elections, especially following on the heels of victory in a presidential election. The United National Party (UNP) did reasonably well for an opposition party, winning 12 percent of the councils, possibly because the SLFP contested separately from partner pro-Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-backed Tamil National Alliance (TNA), contesting as the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK), put in the third strongest showing, out-performing the JVP, which had predicted it would displace the UNP from second place. The JVP turned in a dismal performance, only retaining control of the single PS it had won in 2002, but managed to place second in some districts and boost the total number of local council members from 219 to 363.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The governing SLFP's capture of 83 percent of the councils-- 222 of the 266 contested-- probably reflects a perception by voters that only the ruling party can deliver local benefits. Nevertheless, the government is touting the victory as a stronger mandate for President Mahinda Rajapaksa's efforts on the peace process, and is drawing attention to victories in Badulla and Negombo, traditional UNP strongholds. However, the UNP, which took 32 councils, is claiming victory because it beat the opposition's showing in 2002 LG polls when the SLFP won only 4 out of 317 councils. The ITAK won 5 councils, including an urban council in Trincomalee, earning it a respectable third place showing. Both the SLFP and UNP are calling the elections a failure for the JVP, while the JVP is stressing its gains in numbers of seats and the fact that it came in second in some

localities. The monk-based Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) also made a poor showing, not winning control of a single council and having only 1 member elected to each of 10 local bodies.

13. Comment: A ruling party victory was expected, but the key point is the poor showing of the JVP and the JHU. While the JVP made small inroads by winning second place in some districts, the overall showing must come as a disappointment for the party that campaigned vigorously and boasted that it would show large gains in its vote, perhaps displacing the UNP as the main opposition. President Rajapaksa should now feel less constrained by the JVP as his government prepares for the second round of talks with the LTTE scheduled in Geneva April 19-21. End comment.
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